

SUMMER 2026 | NEWSLETTER

MSU School of Social Work

For Alumni & Friends



MSU School of Social Work

For Alumni & Friends

FEATURES



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LETTER FROM DIRECTOR:

Carrie Moylan



Hello Friends and Supporters of the School of Social Work,

The academic year has a rhythm. Fall is busy with the excitement of a new year as we welcome new students. Spring brings the return of warmth as we welcome students across the graduation stage. Summer is always a time for reflection for those of us involved in academia. Campus quiets down and we find a moment to look back on the past year and prepare for the next year. Faculty work on getting that paper submitted, launching new research projects, or retooling their courses to incorporate feedback from students. Our advisors and program directors plan for welcoming new students in the Fall. The Field Office works to match students with practicum sites where they connect classroom learning with social work practice. So while campus may seem quiet, the reality is that we all continue working on the things that make our School great- impactful research, powerful teaching, connecting students to real-world practice experiences, and creating a vibrant school community!

In this issue of the newsletter, we're happy to share about some of the great work our faculty our doing. We showcase some of our incredible students who are sure to great things in their social work careers. You will read about the incredible and generous support for students, partnerships with health care, and many other exciting ways that the School of Social Work is helping make our campus and communities better!

On another note, you may have heard about some changes related to federal financial aid for graduate and professional programs. A full accounting of the details is beyond the scope of this letter, but the bottom line is that these changes may make it difficult for some students to afford graduate education. Now more than ever, scholarships are the key for ensuring that promising social workers have an opportunity to earn the degree that opens up so many doors. Please consider donating to the school if you are able to ensure that the next generation of social workers can enter the workforce and contribute to building healthy, strong communities! You can learn more about how to donate to support the school and our students by reviewing the info on page 32.

Thanks to all of you for your interest and support of the School!

[#MSUSocialWork](#)

Carrie Moylan, PhD

Director, Professor, School of Social Work

Michigan State University





STUDENT SPOTLIGHT:

Saara Ashtiani

Michigan State University's School of Social Work honors Saara Ashtiani as its 2026 Outstanding Senior Award recipient.

This award recognizes a graduating senior who has demonstrated exemplary academic and extracurricular successes, and a strong sense of leadership, commitment and dedication to MSU.

"It felt amazing to know that the faculty picked me out of all the students in the program," she said. Ashtiani discovered her passion for social work during her second year at MSU and found a strong sense of belonging through the Advocacy Scholars Program: A program dedicated to empowering BASW (and MSW) students to build practical advocacy skills through a mentored, student-designed advocacy

“

I really appreciate the micro and macro ways the MSU School of Social Work taught me to get involved in the communities that I'm around, and **I'm really excited to like incorporate that in my future career goals**

- Saara Ashtiani

project while providing scholarship support and opportunities to create real-world social change.

"The Advocacy Scholars Program really allowed me to build my own name within the School of Social Work," said Ashtiani. "It allowed me to create relationships with different faculty and community members in the Lansing area that I was not familiar with before."

Ashtiani credits her success to the support and compassion felt by her advisors and professors.

"I felt like my professors really wanted to get to know me and appreciated the work that I was turning in," she said. "It felt good to create those relationships."

Internships also played a major role in deciding Ashtiani's career trajectory.



▲ Saara Ashtiani writing on a white board Photo by Brandon Drain for Michigan State University.

Through the MSU School of Social Work's Field Office, students participate in a built-in internship as part of their coursework. This internship placed Ashtiani in the Lansing community, where she was able to broaden her view about how much good she could do in the world.

"The internship definitely changed a big direction of my career goals," she said. "I really appreciate the micro and macro ways the MSU School of Social Work taught me to get involved in the communities that I'm around, and I'm really excited to like incorporate that in my future career goals."

Ashtiani graduated this past spring. She credits her time at MSU with shaping both her career path and her personal growth and encourages others to take every opportunity available to them.

"Don't be confined to just your major," she said. "Even though social work is structured, I was still able to study abroad and get involved in other clubs. Being in social work means understanding the importance of engaging with different communities, so take advantage of that, try new experiences and put yourself out there."



 **HENRY FORD HEALTH +
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY**
Health Sciences

 **HENRY FORD HEALTH +
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY**
Health Sciences

MSU School of Social Work and Henry Ford Health's Trauma Recovery Center are improving

In the latest collaboration through the Henry Ford Health + Michigan State University Health Sciences partnership, Henry Ford Health's Trauma Recovery Center worked with Michigan State University's School of Social Work to strengthen its trauma-informed approach to healing for survivors and families.

As part of their onboarding process, new employees at Henry Ford Health Trauma Recovery Center complete MSU's Trauma Informed Care Certificate Program to best provide holistic healing.

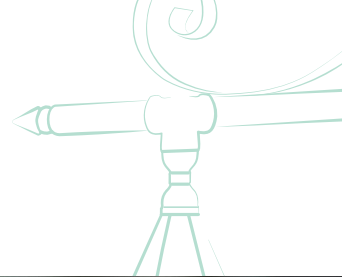
Founded in 2022, The Henry Ford Health Trauma Recovery Center, or TRC, was established to ease the burden for survivors and their families and to facilitate holistic healing — all at no cost to survivors.

“We have been working on establishing and implementing trauma informed care at a system level for the past roughly four or five years now,” said Ali Lakhani, the program manager. “In doing that process, we were connected to the Trauma Services and Training Network through MSU.”

“Integrating trauma informed approaches into both service delivery and organizational culture can strengthen professional practice and improve outcomes for individuals,” said Gina Tremonti Gembel, director of the Continuing Education Program at MSU's School of Social Work.

“The partnership with the Henry Ford Trauma Recovery Center has been exciting and meaningful because it created a direct connection with clinicians who are actively facilitating trauma-informed healing within a healthcare setting and the innovative work of the TRC,” Gembel said.

Unlike most professional development certificates, the MSU Trauma Informed Care Certificate Program provides 32 continuing education contact hours covering various aspects of trauma informed care.





“It wasn’t just the foundations of trauma informed care or just the basics,” said Lakhani. “I really appreciated the trauma informed communication and the trauma informed leadership piece of it.”

As survivors of violent crime can experience lasting effects that impact their mental health and well-being, the TRC works to promote resiliency and holistic recovery for survivors following crime.

“We do pride ourselves on being trauma informed in all of our practices and all of our services,” said Lakhani. “Being trauma informed is about meeting survivors where they are, and we’re looking for staff that understand that and that also have that background in working with trauma survivors, whether that be in the therapy field or even the case management side of things.”

The partnership has strengthened the learning experience for Henry Ford professionals and the MSU School of Social Work community alike, bridging clinical practice with academic expertise.

By Brandon Drain

Michigan State University has been advancing the common good with uncommon will for more than 170 years. Among the world’s top 100 universities and a leading U.S. public research institution, MSU pushes the limits of discovery and innovation to advance the state of Michigan and the nation, and make a better, safer, healthier world for all. The university provides life-changing educational opportunities through an inclusive academic community with more than 400 programs of study and is the largest producer of talent for Michigan, educating more undergraduates than any other university in the state.

For MSU news on the web, go to [MSUToday](#) or [x.com/MSUnews](#)



RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT:

MSU survey shows improved campus climate, emphasizes need for efforts

The results of Michigan State University's 2025 Know More Campus Survey show improvements in campus perceptions, awareness of resources and declines in some forms of victimization since 2019, while finding that sexual harassment and assault continue to affect a significant portion of students, particularly undergraduate cisgender women and transgender and nonbinary students.

The Know More Campus Survey assesses the experiences of students, faculty and staff related to relationship violence and sexual misconduct, workplace incivility, help-seeking and perceptions of campus during the 2024–25 academic year. The 2019, 2022 and 2025 Know More surveys reflect MSU's commitment to transparency and the use of valid data to measure progress and guide action.

The 2025 survey also marks the first time MSU measured experiences of domestic violence among faculty and staff, expanding the university's understanding of how relationship violence affects employees in addition to students.

“We recognize that behind these findings are real people and real experiences, and any harm on our campus matters,” said MSU President Kevin M. Guskiewicz, Ph.D. “These results show progress but, more importantly, they strengthen our resolve to prevent harm, support survivors with empathy, and continue building a campus where everyone feels safe, valued and supported.”



The Know More survey provides critical insight into where MSU has made meaningful progress and where gaps remain.

- Carrie Moylan



All MSU students, faculty and staff were invited to participate in the survey in spring 2025. More than 10,700 people completed the survey. To ensure anonymity, MSU partnered with RTI International, an independent nonprofit research organization, to develop and administer the survey, process the data and report the results.

The survey examined three primary areas: student experiences with relationship violence and sexual misconduct; faculty and staff experiences with workplace incivility, work-related sexual harassment and domestic violence; and perceptions of campus climate, leadership and awareness of resources among students, faculty and staff.

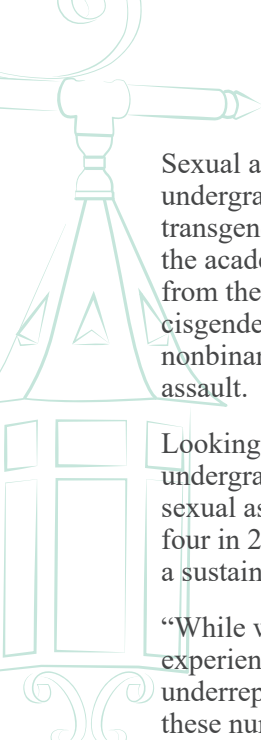
“The Know More survey provides critical insight into where MSU has made meaningful progress and where gaps remain,” said Carrie Moylan, co-chair of the Relationship Violence and Sexual Misconduct Expert Advisory Workgroup Director of the School of Social Work. “While any incidence of violence or harassment is unacceptable, these data help us understand the lived experiences of our community and guide evidence-based decisions to

strengthen prevention efforts, supportive services and institutional accountability.”

Key findings

Results show declines in the prevalence of several types of victimization since 2019 and improvements in most measures of campus perceptions related to relationship violence and sexual misconduct. The survey also found that the vast majority of survivors who sought help from MSU perceived the support they received as helpful.

Sexual harassment remained the most prevalent form of victimization among students. Nearly two-thirds of undergraduate cisgender women and more than two-thirds of transgender and nonbinary undergraduates reported experiencing sexual harassment during the 2024–25 academic year.



Sexual assault was reported by about 6% of undergraduate cisgender women and 7.9% of transgender and nonbinary undergraduates during the academic year. These figures represent a decline from the 2022 survey, when 11.8% of undergraduate cisgender women and 10.6% of transgender and nonbinary undergraduates reported experiencing sexual assault.

Looking at longer-term experiences, about one in five undergraduate cisgender women reported experiencing sexual assault since enrolling at MSU, down from one in four in 2022 and nearly one in three in 2019, suggesting a sustained decrease over time.

“While we are encouraged to see declines in reported experiences, we also know that sexual harm is often underreported,” said Moylan. “Even at lower levels, these numbers remain deeply concerning and reinforce the importance of continuing prevention efforts and ensuring survivors have access to support and resources.”

Among faculty and staff, the majority experienced at least some workplace incivility, though the prevalence declined significantly since 2019. Sexual harassment among faculty and staff also declined, with the highest prevalence reported by transgender and nonbinary employees.

Using the data

The 2025 Know More survey coincides with the formal completion of MSU’s five-year Relationship Violence and Sexual Misconduct Strategic Plan, a roadmap developed by the RVSM Expert Advisory Workgroup and launched in 2020. The survey serves as a clear indicator that the strategies outlined in the RVSM Strategic Plan have a meaningful impact, while also providing a strong foundation for the university’s next phase of work.

The survey results will be used to continue refining policies, prevention programming and survivor services, as well as to identify specific areas of campus climate and culture in need of improvement.

Michigan State University remains committed to fostering a campus culture free from discrimination, harassment, sexual misconduct and relationship violence and to ensuring all students, faculty and staff can fully participate in university life.





Learn More About the Know More Survey

Michigan State University (MSU) sponsored the Know More @ MSU Campus Survey to comprehensively assess the culture, perceptions, and policies associated with sexual misconduct among the entire MSU campus community.

KNOW MORE SURVEY

Michigan State University sponsored the Know More @ MSU Campus Survey to comprehensively assess the culture, perceptions, and policies associated with sexual misconduct among the entire MSU campus community.

LEARN MORE about the Know More @ MSU Campus Survey by scanning the QR code below:



Scan the QR code to
learn more

#MSUSocialWork



Fueling friendships and found family through FAME Program

A GIFT FROM ALUMNA LOU ANN TOMPKINS IS PROVIDING SCHOLARSHIP SUPPORT TO STUDENTS IN THE FAME PROGRAM—MAKING THEIR FORMATIVE MSU EXPERIENCE EVEN BETTER

There is a lady smiling in the middle of a group of equally jovial college students.

She jokes with them—surprising them with her quick sense of humor. She compliments their hairstyles and their outfit choices. She asks them questions about their lives, their classes, their goals.

She makes them feel seen. She reminds them that they deserve to be here. And, perhaps unintentionally, she shows them what kind of Spartan they will probably grow up to be: successful, resilient, and always, always, always looking for ways to make the world better for others.

Her name is Lou Ann Tompkins, and these students, all part of the FAME program here at MSU, are recipients of a scholarship she created through a \$150,000 gift to the program last year.

FAME, which stands for Fostering Academics, Mentoring Excellence, is entering its 19th year as MSU's go-to support system for students who come to MSU from foster care, or for those who were in kinship care, have experienced homelessness, or are otherwise independent at the time they come to college.

"Michigan State has always had a soft spot in my heart"

It's one thing to say that education plays a pivotal role in a person's life story.

It's great to watch any kid make it through the foster care system—because it can be so hard,

- Lou Ann Tompkins

It's another thing to look at the timeline of a person's life and see the exact moments those pivots happened. For Lou Ann Tompkins, those moments are obvious, and with every directional change—with every pivot—her life, and the lives of the people around her, got better.

There was never any specific expectation that 18-year-old Lou Ann would go to college. Her parents didn't push her to attend, and they didn't plan to help her with the cost, but she didn't let that stop her. She chose MSU on her own, cobbled together some scholarships and some work to pay her way, and navigated the unfamiliar challenges of college life by trial and error, blazing her own trail as she went.

That approach became a bit of a reoccurring theme in Lou Ann's life. From that point on, at any fork-in-the-road moment—where Lou Ann could either accept things the way they were, or find a way to make things better—the choice was always to

make things better, and, often, the way to do that was more education.

When job cuts in the auto industry threatened to eliminate her position at General Motors, Lou Ann came back to Michigan State to complete her MBA in finance and went on to get an even better job at Chrysler.

When her children's school was ambivalent about providing necessary accommodations for their needs, Lou Ann went to law school, specialized in special ed law, and made sure that kind of thing wouldn't happen to her kids—or anybody else's kids—again.

"At one point," she recalls, "my daughter said to me, 'Mom, whenever you come into the school, it seems like everybody is afraid of you. Doesn't that bother you?' and I said, 'Not as long as they take good care of my children!'"

And, in addition to giving her more insight in how to improve



educational opportunities for her own children, her time practicing law as a juvenile attorney opened her eyes to the tenacious spirit and, in some cases, unique needs of young people in the foster care system.

It's why she chose to give to the FAME program at MSU.

"It's great to watch any kid make it through the foster care system—because it can be so hard," Lou Ann says. "If they make it through with the grades and the drive and the emotional readiness to go to college? Even better. If they're willing to put that much effort into themselves—into pursuing an education—I am so happy to be able to turn around and put my own effort into supporting them."

"It's hard to think of a way to make something better when it's already so perfect"

This is how the petite, quick-humored, smiling 1982 MBA alumna Lou Ann's life path came to diverge with that of Nyles, a toweringly tall, soft-spoken second-year student who couldn't be happier to be pursuing his dreams at Michigan State.

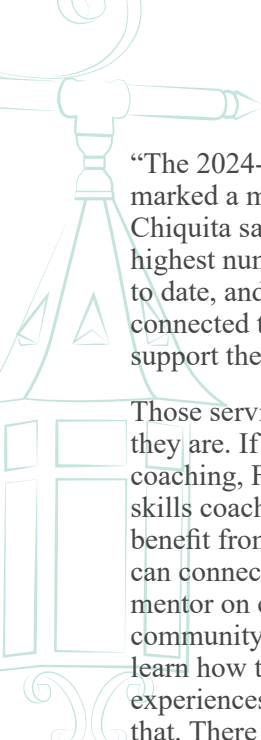
Nyles was adopted by his grandparents at a young age. They raised him and, at some point, raised within him a strong desire to go to college. He's studying criminal justice because he wants to help people, wants to be a part of a community where he can play a role in making it better, for as many people as he can. And he's off to a great start as a member of FAME and a recipient of the scholarship created by—you guessed it—Lou Ann Tompkins.

"Between financial aid and the scholarships I've received, I'm able to go through school without worrying about the financial aspect," he says. "I get to focus on how I can grow as a person, and what I'm going to do to help others in the future."

FAME is, of course, a highlight of his experience so far.

"FAME is like a family on a campus of 50,000 people. I have friends, I have mentors, and I have people looking out for me," he says.

As the director of the FAME program, Chiquita Whittington, LMSW, is one of the people looking out for Nyles, and for all of the students who engage with its services and programming each year.



“The 2024-2025 academic year marked a milestone for FAME,” Chiquita says. “We recorded our highest number of engaged students to date, and ensured that they were connected to services designed to support their success.”

Those services meet students where they are. If they need life skills coaching, FAME has a certified life skills coach to help. If they would benefit from mentorship, FAME can connect them with a volunteer mentor on campus or within the community. If students want to learn how to speak about their experiences, there’s training for that. There are group activities and events. And when a student walks in and says they need a physical item of some sort, like a snack, a household item, or even a new toothbrush—things a student might get in a care package from home—the FAME care closet probably has it, and it is theirs for the taking.

FAME has always been a popular place for annual donors to make a big impact with smaller gifts. Last year alone, with help from MSU’s Crowd Power platform and giving campaigns like Give Green Day, donors gave more than \$61,000 in expendable, discretionary support for these ongoing needs and initiatives in FAME.

Those gifts help keep FAME running, and gifts like Lou Ann’s help it grow. The FAME Scholars Program, launched thanks to her generosity, provided financial support to 47 students last academic year, and helped to draw the attention of prospective students who may not otherwise have known FAME was available to them, let alone that they might be eligible for a scholarship.



*Michigan State University
has always had a soft spot
in my heart.*

- Lou Ann Tompkins

“We owe special thanks to Lou Ann Tompkins,” Chiquita says. “Thanks to her support, we were able to offer engagement-based scholarship programming that encouraged students to stay actively involved and on-track toward graduation.”

Given their shared enthusiasm for wanting to “make things better,” it’s only natural that Lou Ann and Nyles would start dreaming up ways to further bolster FAME’s mission—though Nyles insists that it’s hard to improve on something that, to him, already feels so perfect.

“I have loved every moment of being part of FAME,” he says. “I want every student who finds their way into this program to have this same experience.”

With help from donors, they will. And then some.

Our mission and how to give

FAME is a resource center for foster youth alumni attending MSU as well as for youth who were in kinship care, have experienced homelessness, or are otherwise independent. FAME exists to provide support and resources to these students during their time at MSU to help them be successful during their collegiate experience on MSU’s campus and during their transition to

GIVING INFORMATION

For more information on how to support students and programs at MSU FAME, please contact:

Rachel Schmidt

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Scan the QR code to
give support

#MSUFAME



Student Spotlight:

A Spartan embracing independence and finding community

Since being diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder, Lainey Hampton has discovered her place and purpose at MSU

By Liam Boylan-Pett





One cold day this past March, Lainey Hampton ditched her wheelchair. She used her crutches to walk from her car to class. She almost always uses her wheelchair to get around campus. But on this day, she felt good, and she was excited.

Years earlier, she would have thought nothing of it — of course she would have walked to class. But in 2021, she had noticed something was wrong. Her mobility faltered. Walking became difficult. She was scared.

For years, no one could tell her why. Doctor appointments, tests and misdiagnoses followed until, finally in early 2024, she received an answer. She had a rare genetic disorder — hereditary spastic paraplegia type 5 — that causes weakness and muscle tightness in the legs. It wasn't the diagnosis she hoped for, but Hampton was relieved. She finally knew what she was up against.

Today, Hampton is a first-year student at Michigan State University. She can be found on campus either in her wheelchair or, on good days, walking to her seat in a classroom with a little help from a railing or chair. She's enjoying her first year as a college student and the feeling that comes with it: independence.

"There's a big gap between high school and college and how much you get to do on your own," Hampton says. "And it's really important for someone with a disability to have that independence, which is something I've really found at MSU."

Her independence has given Hampton one more thing: a purpose. She is ready to make the most of the next few years at MSU. "I want to be a therapist," she says, "for people with disabilities who are going through or have gone through a life-changing diagnosis."

Learning to navigate a disability

Hampton and her family had spent years searching for answers after her symptoms first appeared. At one point, she thought it might have all been in her head. So, when she finally learned of her condition, it was a relief. But it was also devastating. The condition is progressive, meaning Hampton's legs will continue to weaken over time.

In August 2023, Hampton and her family moved from Naples, Florida, to East Lansing. She was set to start at East Lansing High School in January 2024, but that coincided with when she learned her diagnosis.

While she was relieved to know what was wrong, she also wondered, "Why me?"

"I have to go through this and battle every day just to get around," she remembers thinking. "Why does everybody else around me get to have a normal teenage life?" She would have to worry about finding an accessible path or knowing the best door to enter a building.

At first, she relied on classmates, teachers and aides at East Lansing High School to help her get to classes during the school day — it was not exactly the introduction she

had hoped to make at a new school. But soon, she says, she decided to accept her fate and find happiness in this new version of herself.

She started using her wheelchair to get around and, even on bad days, embraced her new normal. “I think that people who go through hard stuff like this — and it doesn’t have to be a disability — can gain more strength,” Hampton says. “I feel more empowered now.”

She is still embracing that empowerment two years later, now as a first-year Spartan.

Finding her way

Hampton says she has always been very shy. Living with her disability, however, has taught her to be herself and speak up when she needs to.

Group poses at tennis courts. Some of the tennis players are in wheelchairs

Like any new college student, she is looking to make friends and a community at MSU. She says she’ll talk to people before and after classes as much as possible and does her best to be as welcoming as she can. One thing she does struggle with, however, is that the seating for students with disabilities is often in the front row or back corners of classrooms, which is something she hopes will change over time. She says that other students seem just as eager as her to make friends — Hampton doesn’t notice as many cliques as she saw in high school.

She’s also found support across campus. Through MSU’s Resource Center for Persons with Disabilities, Hampton has access to accommodations and resources that help her navigate classes and daily life.

That support extends beyond the classroom, too, with opportunities to get involved and meet other students.

Hampton has enjoyed one club, in particular. Once every week or two, she plays wheelchair tennis with other students as part of the Adaptive Sports and Recreation Club, and she even traveled to Orlando with the group for a tournament in April for what she says was a life-changing trip.

“I’ve met a lot of people at tennis with and without disabilities,” Hampton says. “It’s been super special to be a part of that.”

As Hampton has grown more comfortable living with her disability, she is looking forward to the rest of her time at MSU, but also to what she hopes comes after.

I want to be a therapist for people with disabilities who are going through or have gone through a life-changing diagnosis.

”

- Lainey Hampton

Looking forward

“There have been a lot of ups and downs,” Hampton says, “but now I kind of see my disability as no big deal.”

She feels she is on the right path — meeting new friends and having fun playing tennis — and she hopes to join more clubs as her schedule allows.

Initially, Hampton planned to major in psychology but now wants to pursue social work.

Looking back on the past few years, wondering what was happening to her and the feelings she had once she was finally diagnosed, made her want to help others. “There’s this grief that comes with something like being diagnosed with a disability,” Hampton says, “like you’re losing a part of yourself.”

“I would love to help people realize that they can still live a life with a body that doesn’t function the way it used to. I want them to find confidence in themselves and live freely, no matter the limits of their body.”



For now, Hampton is enjoying the last few weeks of her first year of college and looking forward to what's ahead. She's going to continue her studies and hopes to share more of her story on social media while advocating for people with disabilities. She posted about her recent tennis trip and writes about her own journey often.

She also wants to explore more of campus. So, if you see her along the Red Cedar River or studying at the Multicultural Center, be sure to say hello.

Learn More:

<https://msutoday.msu.edu/>



SOCIAL WORK SPOTLIGHT:

The State of Michigan expands Title-IVE program

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) expanded its partnership with public universities to strengthen the child welfare workforce by bringing in three new universities, increasing the total number of participating schools to eight.

The State of Michigan Title IV-E Child Welfare Fellowship provides resources and support to students committed to working in the child welfare system. The program aims to recruit, retain and prepare students to become leaders in the field while bolstering the statewide workforce.

“This expansion means hope for the future of Michigan’s child welfare workforce,” said Elizabeth Montemayor, child welfare programming coordinator at Michigan State University’s School of Social Work.

Michigan, like many states, faces a shortage of child welfare workers. To address this, MDHHS launched the Title IV-E Child Welfare Stipend Program last year and increased funding for the program this year from \$1.7 million to \$4.5 million.

“This fellowship has alleviated some of the tuition costs and educational expenses, which has been helpful as an advanced standing student transitioning directly from my BASW into the MSW program,” said Jasmine Zavala-Gonzales, MSU Social Work student. “Academically, the fellowship has strengthened my professional development by providing specialized training in child welfare and opportunities to apply what I learn directly to child welfare practice.”

The fellowship goes beyond the classroom. It provides intentional, real-world preparation for child welfare work by integrating “classroom learning with field experience, while also building a strong sense of community, mentorship, and professional identity,” said Montemayor.

Many alumni praise the program for its practical application and potential for career advancement.

“Obtaining a child welfare certificate from a prestigious program has earned me recognition and professional respect not only among fellow clinicians but also within the courts, local schools, community mental health agencies, foster care licensing organizations, foster parents, and the Indiana Department of Child Services,” said Jeremy McClendon, MSU School of Social Work alum. “The program equipped me with learning new evidence-based practices to help guide case managers and other clinicians use the correct methods, tools and resources available for clients,” he continued.

Oakland University, Eastern Michigan University and Ferris State University are joining the program that provides stipends to social work students who agree to work in under-resourced communities across the state after graduation.

“This investment helps ensure we’re not just filling positions but developing professionals who are ready to stay and grow in this work,” said Montemayor. “By expanding this program statewide, we’re building a stronger, more connected pipeline of professionals who are ready to stay and grow in child welfare.”

“This expansion means hope for the future of Michigan’s child welfare workforce”

Elizabeth Montemayor

Child Welfare
Program Coordinator, MSU
School of Social Work

Learn More:

<https://socialwork.msu.edu/MSW/michigan-title-ive-child-welfare-fellowship.html>



A second chance at education leads Sharon Solo to social work

Sharon Solo started her collegiate journey 25 years ago at Grand Valley State University. And now, the 43-year-old mother of two graduated at the top of her class with a bachelor's degree in social work.

Every educational pathway is different. Some students start college with a well-thought, pre-packed game plan that's executed with relative perfection over the course of eight semesters.

Others immediately find themselves in dark, tough-to-get-out places that either hinder or halt their linear educational progress altogether.

As the years go by, the mere thought of going back to school can be daunting for the latter.

But, "Unfinished business has a way of beckoning you," said Sharon Solo, a 43-year-old graduating senior at MSU's School of Social Work. "First in small, subtle

ways, like pebbles to your window...then stones, then bricks...then it's a frying pan to your head—and it haunts you until you respond," she continued.

Twenty-five years ago, Solo attended Grand Valley State University (GVSU) to pursue a bachelor's degree. And 25 years ago, that same pursuit came to a grinding halt.

During her time at GVSU, Solo suffered from a severe eating disorder which wreaked havoc on her mental and emotional wellbeing.

"I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, I didn't even know who I was," she said. "I didn't attend my classes; I didn't even bother to drop them. I didn't care because I couldn't see a future for myself. I was stuck,



Unfinished business has a way of beckoning you. First in small, subtle ways, like pebbles to your window...then stones, then bricks...then it's a frying pan to your head—and it haunts you until you respond.

”

- Sharon Solo

Unfortunately, Solo's future was still tangled in her past.

When Solo was ready to return to school, she discovered her grades from GVSU were still holding her back.

“I couldn't accept it,” she said. “These grades were 20 plus years old. They were earned by someone who was sick—who was hurting. I knew they were in no way indicative of my ability as a student now.”

Determined to move forward, Solo spent several months pursuing academic restoration from GVSU. Though the process, was difficult, it ultimately cleared her record and gave her, “the freedom to move forward with my life,” she said.

Solo was accepted into MSU's School of Social Work where she would pursue a bachelor's degree.

“I cried my first day on campus and I know I'll cry on my last day, too,” she said.

During her time at MSU, Solo was not only a full-time student, but a full-time mom and a Student Success Coach for the Strategic Retention Unit, all while commuting from her home in Ann Arbor.

Solo also maintained a perfect 4.0 GPA during her undergraduate tenure as well, making her one of the School of Social Work's top graduating seniors for 2026.

Despite this, one of Solo's biggest achievements while in college was her advocacy in “normalizing alternative educational experiences and creating more pathways back to school for non-traditional students.”

Once she learned that MSU didn't have an academic restoration policy, “It became a pebble in my shoe,” she said.

With the support of her field and task supervisors at the Strategic Retention Unit, she pursued an invitation to present research along with her story to the Some College, No Degree (SCND) Steering Committee.

lost and just incredibly unhealthy.”

Solo's collegiate journey was put on hold, and another journey began: One that included physical healing, motherhood, divorce and self-discovery

Over the next two decades, Sharon's life had gotten better. She became a mother of two, travelled the world, and volunteered—all of which brought her a sense of fulfillment, peace and happiness.

Still, something was still missing from her life.

“Recovering from my eating disorder was the fight of my life, but I found that achieving physical health did not mean I was healed,” she said. “I don't think anything other than a corrective experience of education could have truly healed me.”

During her healing journey, Solo worked with social workers who helped her make sense of her past and present. Over time, that support helped her imagine a future of her own: one in social work.

“Choosing social work was easy,” she said. “This was a path that had been illuminated for me over time as I had grown to see myself as capable of helping others to untangle obstructions to their best lives.”



“There are so many obstacles to returning to school, and the thought that someone could be held back by grades that don’t represent them as a student just breaks my heart,” she said.

Solo’s advocacy and story inspired members of the committee to draft a policy proposal to introduce academic restoration.

“While this doesn’t guarantee that MSU will implement the policy, it meant the world to me just to try and crack that door open,” she said.

When graduating seniors walk across the stage at commencement, each step forward represents years—sometimes generations—worth of struggle, hardship, and a sense of duty.

For Solo, this walk is the culmination of two decades worth of struggle and sacrifice.

It represents what is possible for those who come from alternative educational backgrounds.

It illustrates that no matter how far a person falls, they can still get up and climb even higher.

And it illuminates Solo as a beacon of inspiration for anyone thinking of going back to school.

“Everyone at MSU has made me feel welcome and supported,” said Solo, “and I want to share that sense of belonging with anyone out there who wants to return to school. You belong on that college campus, period.”



RESEARCH IN ACTION:

Study: emotional support lowers incarceration risk for youth in foster

Youth in foster care often experience family instability, which can disrupt the continuity of their relationships and social connections. Therefore, the strength and stability of their social support networks can play a critical role in shaping their lives.

Social support networks refer to a holistic web of family members, friends, neighbors and community members who provide emotional, practical, and informational support during times of need.

In her recent study, published in the journal *Social Work Research*, Keunhye Park, assistant professor at Michigan State University's School of Social Work, examined the relationship between different dimensions of social support networks, such as type and size, and incarceration among youth with foster care experience.

Specifically, for those transitioning into adulthood, Park found that strong social support networks not only reduced the likelihood of incarceration but also positively facilitated adjusting to adulthood.

“Given the developmental tasks of early adulthood (e.g., pursuing postsecondary education, obtaining employment, securing housing), legal system involvement during the transition to adulthood can present additional challenges and may have lasting implications across the life course,” Park said.

Previous research has shown that weak or disrupted connections with supportive individuals, conventional systems, or widely accepted social values are associated with a higher likelihood of justice system involvement among youth with foster care experience, reinforcing Park's study, which highlights the importance of stable and supportive support networks.

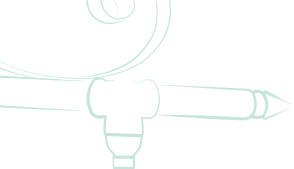
Among the different types of social support, emotional support stood out as particularly important. Youth who reported having adequate emotional support were less likely to experience incarceration, according to the research.

“Adequate emotional support was significantly associated with decreased odds of incarceration,” said Park. “This research suggests that some forms of social support may be more effective than others in influencing legal system outcomes.”

These findings highlight the importance of active outreach and engagement efforts by child welfare professionals to strengthen supportive relationships that provide comfort, reassurance and encouragement to youth navigating emotional distress.

More specifically, children should be placed in foster care options that best reflect their social networks, with minimal disruptions.

“There are key implications for the development of targeted interventions and support systems within the field of child welfare and social work,” Park said.



Belonging at MSU Through FAME Program

Hayley Rose shares how FAME helped her find support, connection and a sense of belonging at MSU.

Watch her student testimonial and learn more about how FAME supports students through mentorship, community and student-centered resources.



Scan the QR code to learn more
about her story.

#MSUFAME

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT:

Getting to Know Gerry Crawford

Through conversations with Gerry Crawford, MSW intern Phyllis Jackson explores the power of storytelling, connection and one man's lasting commitment to community.

One of the most meaningful parts of my internship with the Dementia Care Lab at Michigan State University has been the opportunity to connect with different people. I first met Gerald Crawford during a weekly Zoom meeting led by my intern supervisor, Dr. Fei Sun, several months after the loss of his wife, Marlynne. Even through a screen, it was easy to see that Gerry is someone who truly embraces life and enjoys sharing his experiences with others. He has lived a life full of adventure and curiosity, and hearing his stories has been both inspiring and heartwarming.

Gerry, as he likes to be called, has written a book about his life and travels, and he has a wide range of hobbies that keep him active and engaged. He loves flying airplanes, sailing, collecting and restoring tractors, and birdwatching. One of his favorite activities is walking around his property photographing birds and other wildlife he observes along the way.

During one of our conversations, Gerry also introduced me to his two lifelike robotic pet dogs. They were originally companions for his wife, and they have quite a bit of personality. The robotic pets bark when they want attention and move around the house freely, much like real puppies. They even have their own sleeping pads where they recharge. Gerry's robotic pet showed how small things can bring comfort and joy.

Beyond his many interests, what stands out most about Gerry is his deep commitment to helping others. To honor his longtime friend who served as a sheriff for 17 years, Gerry established the Kirk Alan Wakefield Memorial Scholarship. This scholarship supports students from Crawford, Roscommon, Kalkaska, Montmorency, and Ogemaw counties who plan to study Criminal Justice at Kirtland Community College or attend the Kirtland Regional Police Academy.

Through this scholarship, Gerry continues to honor his friend's dedication to public service while supporting the next generation of first responders. It is a powerful example of how one person can make a lasting difference in their community.

Getting to know Gerry has been a reminder of how meaningful it is to listen to people's stories. As a social work student, experiences like this reinforce the importance of connection, compassion, and honoring the lives and legacies that shape our communities.

For more information, contact the Community Foundation for Northeast Michigan.

NEW STUDY

A new study of 616 transition-age youth in foster care found that adequate emotional support at age 17 was associated with significantly lower rates of incarceration in early adulthood.

616

YOUTH STUDIED

12.5%

**INCARCERATED
BY AGE 21**

40.8%

**HAD PRIOR LEGAL
SYSTEM INVOLVEMENT**

82%

**LOWER ODDS OF LATER
INCARCERATION WITH
ADEQUATE EMOTIONAL
SUPPORT**

The findings underscore the importance of strengthening supportive relationships for youth in foster care as they transition to adulthood.

**LEARN
MORE**



Nicki Moody



Michigan State University's College of Social Science honored Nicki Moody with the Dean's Institutional Access Staff Award.

Presented every two years, the award is one of the college's

most prestigious honors and recognizes staff who demonstrate an exceptional commitment to fostering an environment where institutional access is understood, valued, respected and practiced.

"It's validating to know the work I'm doing is meaningful to others and that it impacts people in important ways," said Moody, a field office coordinator in MSU's School of Social Work.

Moody was recognized for her advocacy in expanding paid internship opportunities for social work students during their field placements. Her efforts contributed to a 38% increase in paid placements—an achievement she called "a real pride point for me, because it's been a hill that I've been standing on firmly for more than five years."

As a first-generation college student herself, Moody understands the financial barriers many students face while pursuing a degree.

"I was always drawn to working with students who were first gen," she said. "I was drawn to students who didn't have what I call that financial safety net."

That commitment has had a meaningful impact on student success, particularly for low-income students in the School of Social Work.

"While many instructors express empathy for the financial struggles of students, Professor Moody translates that empathy into systemic change," said Mackenzie Dougherty, an MSU Social Work student. "Recognizing that many students were essentially 'paying to work' due to the high costs of fuel and vehicle maintenance, Professor Moody navigated the complex university administration to advocate for a policy change."

Moody's student-centered approach allows her to identify barriers and gaps students face and work toward solutions that expand opportunity.

"For me, this recognition is rooted in my own experience in having done unpaid internships to complete degrees because I didn't have that financial safety support," said Moody.

The Office of Institutional Access works to create an equitable, welcoming, and opportunity-rich environment for faculty, staff, students, alumni, and our surrounding communities. We advance access by identifying and removing barriers, closing opportunity gaps, and fostering conditions for success. Through collaboration, innovation, and accountability, we strive to ensure that all members of our community can thrive and contribute fully to the life of the College of Social Science.

Celebrating 20 Years of The Statewide Blended MSW Program

In 2004, leadership within the School of Social Work recognized both a challenge and an extraordinary opportunity. While the School remained deeply committed to MSU's land-grant mission of serving communities across the state, it had become increasingly clear that sustaining a traditional off-campus MSW program in a single location would be difficult. At the same time, advances in technology were beginning to transform higher education, making distance learning more reliable, accessible, and innovative than ever before. Combined with growing research on the importance of small learning communities, these developments laid the foundation for what would become the groundbreaking Statewide Blended MSW Program.

Professor Paul Freddolino spearheaded the development of the program, envisioning a model that combined the best aspects of face-to-face learning, online education, and interactive video technology. After presenting the concept to then-School Director Gary Anderson, Freddolino received enthusiastic support to bring the vision to life. He assembled a dedicated team of colleagues, including Glenn Stutzky, Sally Rypkema, and Marya Sosulski, to design a program unlike any other in the country. Freddolino also partnered with Phil Barrie from MSU's television services to ensure the ambitious technological vision could become a reality.

At the heart of the program was connection. The original model centered on five small learning communities, each composed of five students guided by a faculty mentor. These mentors, experienced MSW practitioners themselves, provided academic support and professional guidance while later serving as field liaisons during students' practicum experiences. Julie Navarre and Cheryl Williams-Hecksel in the Field Office also played a vital role in strengthening the mentor/liaison model, helping coordinate field education, and ensuring students remained supported and connected throughout their practicum experiences. Even from a distance, the program was intentionally designed to foster relationships, collaboration, and a strong sense of belonging.

One of the program's most defining traditions became the Summer Institute, an intensive residential week held annually on MSU's campus in East Lansing. The Summer Institute welcomed students into the Spartan community, helping them build relationships, establish professional values, and connect deeply with peers, faculty, and mentors. In the program's earliest years, students arrived on campus carrying computer towers so software could be individually installed onto their machines; this is a vivid reminder of how far both technology and the program itself have evolved over the past two decades.

Recruitment for the inaugural cohort began in Fall 2005, with faculty and staff traveling throughout Michigan to introduce prospective students to this innovative new pathway to social work education. Every applicant participated in an interview process and completed the Online Assessment and Orientation Program to ensure the program was a strong fit for their learning style and professional goals.

The program grew rapidly. By 2008, approximately 75 students and 15 mentors gathered at the Summer Institute each year, creating a vibrant statewide network of future social workers committed to serving their communities. Over time, additional pathways, including advanced standing and full-time options, expanded access for students balancing careers, families, and graduate education. Making all this happen were Tina Thompson and Kelly Fornwalt, serving as program administrators.

As technology advanced and student needs evolved, so did the program. By Fall 2019, the Statewide Blended MSW Program fully transitioned from interactive television technology to Zoom-based learning, continuing its tradition of innovation while adapting to an increasingly competitive online educational landscape.

Twenty years later, the Statewide Blended MSW Program stands as a powerful example of innovation, resilience, and MSU's enduring commitment to access and service. Hundreds of graduates have carried the program's mission into communities across Michigan and beyond, advancing social justice and improving lives.

As Professor Freddolino eases into retirement, his visionary leadership and unwavering belief in the power of accessible education leave behind a lasting legacy, one that transformed social work education and opened doors for hundreds of students who may otherwise have never had the opportunity to pursue their MSW degree.



HOW TO GIVE:

Invest in initiatives meaningful to you

Students enter the profession of social work with a strong commitment to service, integrity, and competence. As social work educators, we believe that the good our graduates do is multiplied and extended across generations, and we are honored to help prepare them for their service.

In keeping with land-grant principles of education, research, and outreach/service, we take seriously our responsibility to the education and training of students as well as outreach for community engagement.

GIVING INFORMATION

If you share our values, please consider supporting these efforts with a gift to one of the scholarship and endowment funds highlighted below. A full list of giving opportunities and links to donate online can be found below.



Scan the QR code to give support

#MSUSocialWork

MSU School of Social Work

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MSU SOCIAL WORK

A Mission of Social Justice and Positive Change

The MSU School of Social Work is dedicated to educating students for ethical, competent, responsive, and innovative social work practice, and to conducting and disseminating high quality research that improves the well-being of the most vulnerable in society. Our teaching, research, and outreach synergistically promote social justice, positive change, and solutions to the problems facing diverse individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities.



School of Social Work
MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY